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ABSTRACT

A Study investigated the informal methods of governmental information control used in four countries--the United States, Great Britain, West Germany, and the Soviet Union--to determine how the governments discretely and quietly limited unfavorable publicity. The examination revealed seven possible control methods: (1) preemptive leaks, (2) coverups, (3) "rough stuff," (4) persuasion, (5) retaliation against whistle blowers, (6) limitations on national freedom of information policies, and (7) establishment mentality. The examination showed that governments in all four countries desired to limit information about their activities. Similarly, the media in all four countries appeared to be compliant. There were, however, important differences; in the Soviet Union, informal controls were sometimes literally a matter of life and death, while those in the other three nations appeared to be more humane. (FL)

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"News Restrictions as Transcultural Phenomenon: A Comparative Study of Informal Information Controls"

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"News Restrictions as Transcultural Phenomenon:
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This essay explores informal methods of governmental information control, within the broad context of media/government interactions, in four nations-- the United States, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, the Federal Republic of Germany, and Great Britain. The basic question addressed in this research is-- how do governments quietly and discretely attempt to limit unfavorable publicity?

Seven possible methods include: 1) preemptive leaks, 2) coverups, 3) rough stuff, 4) persuasion, 5) retaliation vs. whistle-blowers, 6) limitations on national freedom of information policies, and 7) establishment mentality.

An examination of the informal information control systems of these four nations reveals relatively similar goals, yet vastly different methods. The media is typically responsive to governmental pressure to restrain publication of especially sensitive material. A comparative approach to the study of informal information controls is warranted, due to the potentially significant intercultural similarities and ifferences involved.

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All nations, whether democratic, authoritarian or otherwise, seem destined to confront difficult questions involving regulation or restriction of information. It seems axiomatic that governments and mass media work essentially at cross purposes over the dissemination of information salient to current policies and issues. Many in the media seek to maximize disclosures of information regarding the government, while the government prefers to censor and limit what the public sees, reads and hears.

These restrictions may be official, as in the case of explicitly stated Federal Communications Commission regulations, or they may be unofficial. Official information controls are those which are publicly admitted by the government and commonly known about by the public. They include laws, regulatory agency decisions, court decisions, and administrative decisions. These overt mechanisms for controlling news flow have been the object of numerous studies.

There are many ways to unofficially control information. The very nature of such activities, unfortunately, is clandestine and unpublicized, making it difficult to systematically assess such controls. Seven possible methods include; 1) preemptive leaks, 2) coverups, 3) rough stuff, 4) persuasion, 5) retaliation versus whistle-blowers, 6) limitations on national freedom of information policies, and 7) establishment mentality.

These seven types of informal information controls will be sought in the information policies of the United States, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, the Federal Republic of Germany, and Great Britain Although instances of all seven methods were not evident for all four countries, at least two countries employed each technique. This essay is not intended as a comprehensive analysis of government/media interactions in these four nations, but rather as a pointing essay illustrating the value of systems analysis in examining intercultural communication variables.

Preemptive leaks

Although it is perhaps more common to refer to the information-expanding functions of leaks, it is also possible to conceive of an opposite function served by leaks, preemptive disclosures which may restrict discussion or full consideration of an issue. Rourke noted that there is "... a goal of duplicity where administrative secrecy is concerned... the practice of leaking one-sided versions of events from executive files that are otherwise closed to the public. This partial disclosure of information may permit the executive to mold public opinion in ways that would not be possible if the whole story were made immediately available for critical appraisal." (16, p. 106).

In the US, "... this practice (leaking) is so widespread and frequent that newsmen regularly assigned to government agencies such as the Pentagon literally become mouthpieces for the organizations they are assigned to cover... for this reason, the Washington press corps, although comprising some of the best talent in American journalism, is probably

the most corrupt and manipulated group of newsmen in American journalism" (11, pp. 192-3). While some may consider Minor's statement about corrupt Washington journalists to be a bit overstated, specific examples of leaks intended to preempt public discussion and news dissemination can be cited.

Shortly after the assassination of President John F. Kennedy in November of 1963, Federal Bureau of Investigation Director J. Edgar Hoover leaked the FBI Summary Report on the assassination to the press. This report concluded that Lee Harvey Oswald had acted alone, and Hoover's premature release of the FBI study was a publicity coup which forced the President's Commission on the Assassination of President John F. Kennedy to arrive at similar conclusions.

In the late 1960's, two private airfields near Colorado Springs, Colorado, were literally invaded one morning by uniformed US Army personnel. All employees and others at both locations were rounded up and detained in secured rooms with covered windows. Telephones were disconnected, radios and transmitters were turned off, and lights were extinguished. Despite these precautions, one of the airport employees managed to get a glimpse at what the security forces were trying to conceal-- American military personnel assisting uniformed Oriental males onto C5-A transport planes. Wise explained that "The newspapers learned the nationality of the 'Orientals" seen at Peterson Field only from a high official who simultaneously requested that the story be killed. By taking the New York Times correspondent into his confidence... he probably realized that this would make it ethically difficult to reveal that the men were Tibetans. The stratgem is an old one, not unlike one boxer clinching with another, and the purpose is the same-- to 'tie up' the reporter so he cannot publish something" (22, pp. 190-1).

Leaks of information to curtail further information dissemination is not, however, a practice restricted to the US. In the Soviet Union the lecture circuit is the method employed whereby leaks are used to restrict information flow. Smith explained that "Lectures were used to provide more than usually candid explanations of Party policy, to start whisper campaigns against dissidents like Solzhenitsyn and Sakharov..." (18, p. 365).

Coverups

Coverups have occured in the US with discomforting frequency, and it is probable that others remain to be discovered. Five recent American coverups involved the assassination of John Kennedy, the My Lai massacre, unidentified flying objects, Watergate and the Spanish A-Bomb disappearance.

After Kennedy was assassinated in 1963, the physician who performed the autopsy burned the original draft of his autopsy notes, because they contained information contrary to the FBI version of the assassination (12, p. 60). Additionally, there is strong evidence that investigative agencies such as the FBI and the Central Intelligence Agency deliberately withheld information from the Warren Commission, as the President's Commission was popularly known. A staff counsel, Burt Griffin, stated that "I never thought the Dallas police was telling us the entire truth. Neither was the FBI" (12, p. 54).

The My Lai massacre, which resulted in the conviction of Lt. William Calley until a Nixon pardon freed him, involved the B company of the Americal Division, US Army. Initially, the atrocity was reported in the US as a hard-fought battle victory-- the New York Times headline

for March 17, 1968, read; "GI's, in Pincer Move, Kill 128 in Daylong Battle" (7, p. 26). The truth, of course, was that between 150 and 200 children, women and elderly men were rounded up, herded to the sides of ditches, and slain, according to witnesses who observed the event (7, p. 22).

Yet, when the Peers Commission sought to determine the facts regarding the persistent rumors of a My Lai massacre, a key section of its report was withheld for five years-- "It appears, however, that the number of non-combattants killed by Company B on 16 March 1968 may have been as high as 90" (7, pp. 20-8). Even though the full magnitude of the crime was never admitted by the US government, the partial admission and coverup stands as a case in point.

A more recent example of coverup, the Watergate affair, is quite familiar to most Americans. Rule summarized the Watergate coverup as including the break-in, attempts to cover up the antecedents of the break-in, the enemies list, and the break-in at Daniel Ellsburg's psychiatrists' office (17, p. 7).

Unidentified flying objects, or UFO's as they are popularly known, have also been covered up in the US. Army Lieutenant Robert Olsen, assigned to Project Blue Book as an Intelligence Officer, remarked in 1962 to a UFO researcher that "We're going to try to keep such reports out of the papers" (9, p. 83). Lorenzen noted that these efforts were successful; "During the (UFO) flaps in the summers of 1954 and 1956 sightings were made throughout the United States in great numbers, but the wire services did not carry the reports" (9, p. 83).

A final American instance of coverup involves the disappearance of

a hydrogen bomb off the coast of Palomares, Spain, in 1966. According to former Senator J. W. Fulbright, "On January 17, 1966, a B-52 bomber carrying four hydrogen bombs collided over Palomares, Spain, with a tanker aircraft. The two planes crashed, and the bombs were strewn over the area. One was lost in the Mediterranean Sea. For forty-four days there was no official acknowledgement by the United States government" (4, pp. 23-4).

In the Soviet Union it also appears that coverups are frequent occurences. Smith described the central tendency of the USSR towards secrecy when he noted that "The Soviet press does not report catastrophes, except in the rare cases where foreigners or Soviet VIP's are involved, and then only briefly and cryptically" (18, p. 346).

A major forest fire threatened Moscow itself in August of 1972, yet was covered up. Smith observed that "... more than one thousand firefighters, including planes, paratroopers and entire military units had joined the battle. It turned out that some fires were extinguished no more than 15-20 miles from the Kremlin, very close to populated suburbs of Moscow. Yet most of the press printed practically nothing and Pravda... ran not a word" (18, pp. 244-5).

Medical and public health censorship has proven fatal in the USSR. A West German diplomat died recently of undiagnosed spinal meningitis because Soviet public health authorities had suppressed news of other Moscow-area cases of the disease (18, p. 361).

In a final instance of Soviet coverup, a modern Jack-the Ripper terrorized the streets of Moscow in October of 1974, killing at least 11 women with an axe. Yet, "The press printed nothing... on the day that

Reuters was told unofficially that a psychopath was under observation, believed to be guilty of 11 deaths, Evening Moscow quoted Viktor Rashkovsky, Deputy Chief of the Moscow Police Department-- 'No dangerous crimes have been committed in the city in the last ten days'," (18, pp. 346-7).

In West Germany, the Spiegel Affair resulted from Defense Minister Strauss' desire to keep secret a NATO report which condemned German military unpreparedness regarding NATO exercizes. After a NATO exercize in West Germany had produced suboptimal West German military performances, Strauss sought to limit public knowledge of the entire incident, only to be foiled by Gerhard Gehlen, head of the West German intelligence establishment (15).

Rough stuff

Sometimes governments resort to physical violence, torture and murder in attempts to suppress information. Milder forms of rough stuff might include violations of due process and illegal police behavior.

In the US, rough stuff typically takes the form of illegal electronic and physical surveillance, warrantless break-ins, and related behavior. The Final Report of the Senate Select Committee on Government Operations concluded in 1976 that "... from 1940 to 1973 the CIA and FBI engaged in twelve covert mail opening programs in violation of Sections 1701-1703 of Title 18 of the US Code... both of these agencies also engaged in warrantless 'surreptitious entries'- break-ins" (21, p. 139).

The culpability of these agencies is magnified by the fact that

little care was exercized to preserve the law. The aforementioned 1976 probe into lawlessness by American intelligence agencies concluded that "Both the former chief of the Counterintelligence staff and the former Director of Security- who were in charge of the New York project (mail cover)-- testified that they believed it to be illegal. One Inspector General who reviewed the project in 1969 also flatly stated, 'Of course, we knew that this was illegal... everybody knew that this was illegal', " (21, p. 143). William Sullivan, a former high-ranking FBI aide, noted "as far as legality is concerned, morals or ethics... it was never raised by myself or anybody else" (21, p. 140).

In the USSR, rough stuff is far rougher. The KGB, an organ of the Communist Party, is charged with the maintenance of internal security. This goal is achieved in part through an elaborate and pervasive system of informants, which Wolin and Slusser characterized as "... a system of secret police which controls every branch of Soviet life" (22, p. 27). Hingley agrees, claiming that "... the Russian Secret Police has expanded from relatively tiny beginnings to swamp and penetrate every corner of society," with the result being "creation of systematic political terror on a nationwide scale" (8, pp. 64, 68). This system of informants is promoted by Soviet law; "Every citizen of the USSR is bound by law to act as a political informer under articles 58-1c, 58-1d, and 58-12 of the Criminal Code" (22, p. 194).

A particularly effective way to deal with dissidents has been used by the Soviets, involving psychiatry. Amnesty International has estimated that there were at least 120 recent instances where healthy Soviet dissidents were institutionalized and abused with drugs which destroyed their central nervous systems (19, p. 34 , 38, 40-1).

The fact that these men were being tortured, not treated for real diseases, was the conclusion of Dr. Alfred M. Freeman, past president of the American Psychiatric Association, who was allowed to visit some of the supposedly ill dissidents. Freedman noted that "Differences of opinion, criticism and opposition were considered as bizarre behavior and important manifestations of illness" (19, pp. 40-1).

The Spiegel affair is an example where West German authorities engaged in rough stuff. After that periodical published a report critical of West German participation in NATO exercizes, a midnight raid was conducted on the Spiegel offices. Noses were bloodied, editors arrested and quickly released, and the police tactics were likened to those once employed by the Gestapo under Adolf Hitler's reign (15, p. 197).

Similar things have happened in recent years in Great Britian. When the Sunday Times disclosed plans to make a 40% reduction in rail service in 1972, the British police conducted a midnight raid on the offices of the Railway Gazette, a trade periodical suspected of being the source of the Sunday Times' information (5, p. 331). Similarly, when the British Broadcasting Corporation broadcast facts regarding the British bombing of Port Said during the Suez Canal crisis, the BBC Board of Governors responded to political pressure by threatening a variety of sanctions, including financial cuts, assignment of a liaison, and total reorganization of the External Services department (3, pp. 235-7).

Persuasion

Persuasion has been used in the US by government officials to

control information. A notable example involved the Glomar Explorer, a super-secret ocean-bottom vessel built by Howard Hughes for the CIA, as part of the attempt to raise a sunken Soviet submarine located off the eastern seaboard of the US. After a West Coast newspaper learned of the mission, "... the CIA persuaded the Los Angeles Times to kill the story... the New York Times management also agreed not to publish it after pleas from CIA Director William Colby. Although the story spread rapidly by word of mouth, the director appealed successfully to each newspaper, news magazine and network in turn, persuading them that national security required suppression of the story" (6, p. 38).

A second example of governmental persuasion to restrict information flow involves the previously mentioned incident of the Tibetans in Colorado. Wise observed that "The high-level Pentagon caller urgently pleaded that the Times kill the story... Accepting the governments' ples, the Times chose to dig no further, it did not run the sensational story of what was apparently a secret US operation based in the Rocky Mountains and directed at Communist China" (22, pp. 178-9). In both of these instances, the American media chose not to disseminate newsworthy stories in direct response to government appeals.

Retaliation vs. whistle-blowers

A whistle-blower is one who is part of the establishment, or government, yet who divulges information critical of the status quo. In the US, whistle-blowers are usually the victim of retaliation by their former employer. B. B. Bray, who served as associate staff director and federal employee ombudsman, described the manner in which

psychiatric evidence is marshalled against critics of the government; "There is no telling the number of people who get their medical discharges after they make waves or speak out. They get sent to a psychiatrist, then out. The personnel people say, 'Well, he's got a file this thick, which indicates that he has a poor personality, a bad disposition, and that nobody can get along with him.' Things haven't gotten a bit better during the past ten years, and maybe worse...Not only do they fire the complainants, but the others get promoted...The Pentagon will spend a thousand dollars to cover up a nickel error" (14, pp. 189-90).

Numerous examples of whistle-blowing can be cited. Ernest Fitzgerald was a cost-accountant in the Management Systems Department of the Department of Defense, charged with keeping costs low on the C-5A transport plane. When he testified before Congressional committees that there were at least $2 billion in cost overruns on the C-5A, despite denials by the Air Force, his job was eliminated (14, p. 183). Dr. Jacqueline Verrett was a scientist with the Food and Drug Administration who warned about potential toxicity of common dyes. Her persistence in executing her job resulted in not one but two public censures by her superiors (14, pp. 190-5).

John McGee was assigned to the Navy Fuel Supply Office in Thailand, where he noticed that 52% of all the petroleum shipped to his office was being stolen and sold on the black market. He informed his superiors and was told to mind his own business, so he blew the whistle to officials in Washington, D.C. For his diligence, McGee was assigned to a non-existant program, and told to prepare various contingency plans of absolutely no value (14, pp. 186-90).

Although blowing the whistle is unpleasant in the US, it is even riskier in the USSR. Traditionally, Soviets have been unforgiving with respect to internal critics. For example, here is a partial but representative list of ex-Soviet and anti-Soviet leaders and officials who suffered the price for being out-of-line with Kremlin policy: General Petruva, Ukranian nationalist leader, murdered in Paris in 1926; General Kutepov, White Russian war veteran leader, kidnaped in Paris in 1930 and never seen again; General Miller, Kutepov's successor, also kidnaped and never seen again in 1937; ~~Leo~~ Leon Trotsky, brutally axe-murdered in Mexico City in 1940; and Stephen Bandura and Lev Rebet, Ukranian emigree leaders, murdered in 1957 and 1959, respectively (2, 85).

Such treatment of whistle-blowers has not lessened in the USSR in recent times, In fact, dissidents recently receiving prison and labor camp sentences for dissemination of information, include: Yuri Shikhanovich, mathematician, and Leonid Plyusch, physicist, given drugs to destroy the central nervous system; Vladimir Bukovsky, sentenced to five years imprisonment and seven years of exile, 'traded' for Chilean Communist Luis Cordova; Vyachslav Chernovil, a Lvov, Ukraine, television personality, incarcerated for reporting the round-up of Ukranian intellectuals in 1965; Kronid Lyubarsky, astrophysicist, sentenced to five years in prison for helping publish the Chronicle of Current Events; Andrei A. Amalrik, writer, sent to a Siberian work camp for "disseminating falsehoods derogatory to the Soviet state"; Sergei Kovalov, biologist, sentenced to seven years in a "strict regime labor camp," (the harshest Soviet penal conditions) for helping with the Chronicle of Current Events and the Chronicle of the Lithuanian-Catholic Church; Alexander Gingsberg, sentenced to eight years

for "anti-Soviet agitation and propaganda;" and Yuri Orlov, sentenced to twelve years for anti-Soviet agitation (19; pp. 30-57).

National freedom of information policies

Whatever the informal controls used in a nation may be, they are part of an informal network or system. Thus, it is important to consider the explicitly stated freedom of information legislation or policy endorsed by a government, to determine the context within which informal information controls are employed.

In the US, the Freedom of Information Act was intended to free all non-national security information for public inspection. Marvin Michaelson, a civil liberties attorney, noted that the nine major categories of exemptions to the FOIA "are broad enough to protect massive amounts of secrets (20, p. 125). Beyond these exemptions written into the law, intelligence and law enforcement agencies "routinely deny citizens access to their files" (20, p. 123).

When an agency does decide to honor requests for information, according to Thomas, the result is information which is "incomplete and heavily censored" (20, p. 123). Thus, although the FOIA was meant to lessen secrecy, "...many believe that the FOIA is still a long way from accomplishing its goal of ending government behind closed doors" (20, p. 123).

In the Soviet Union, there is no equivalent to the American FOIA. As a general rule there is no right-to-know afforded the Soviet average citizen, and only a few periodicals such as Literaturka provide real information to readers and viewers. In recent years Literaturka has investigated industrial pollution of Lake Baikal in Siberia, traffic

congestion, urban transportation problems, auto part shortages, consumer rip-offs, high divorce rates, private coops, and the university entrance exams system (18, pp. 369-74).

Great Britain lacks official recognition of the body politics' right of access to information. Although the Official Secrets Act deals with what is secret and what is not, Mathews concluded that "...there is no statute which confers a general right to information, and the common law is totally underdeveloped in the direction of providing either rights or remedies to that end" (10, p. 101).

Establishment mentality

The first six categories of informal information controls discussed in this essay all have two things in common--they involve acts of government officials, and the intent is to curtail information. However, the final type of informal information control to be discussed in this paper, establishment mentality, is different in that it comes from within the journalist. As media personnel acquire prestige and move upwards in their profession, they are increasingly reluctant to make waves and jeopardize establishment sources of information, upon whom they commonly depend. However, governments acts are still involved, as information required by journalists is controlled by those in the agencies or departments. In all four countries discussed in this essay, it can be demonstrated, the government seeks to limit information and the media acquiesces.

In the US, there is a tendency for the government to seek to restrict information. Nimmo observed that "...a government body acts to formulate, select and transmit promotional messages to explain and justify its policies" (13, p. 7). Heise agreed, claiming that "The country is clearly looking for much more open government, yet...the prevailing attitude within the bureaucracy is to conduct the business of public information as usual" (7, p. ix). Minor observed within the behavior of the press a "...tendency to act as a transmission belt for the opinions, attitudes and priorities of public figures and agencies," which resulted from "...an information process established by the manipulative tendencies of government officials and agencies" (11, p. 190). Arendt referred to a "...commitment to nontruthfulness in politics... at the highest levels of government," and she concluded that "...in the realm of politics...secrecy and deception have always played a significant role" (1, pp. 4, 36).

The result of the desire for secrecy manifested by government agents and agencies is information control, because reporters are not eager to alienate valuable official sources of information. Rivers noted that "If networks with all their power and wealth are so sensitive to criticism and pressure, it seems foolish to expect more from an individual station. To become a true adversary, a station must overcome the pressures of friendship with the Congress, the pressures of the cash register and the fear of the FCC" (15, pp. 156-7). Halperin and Hoffman stated this point even more forcefully; "...restraints are largely determined by the explicit demands and the tacit expectations of the government officials who control the information that the press requires" (6, p. 25).

The same two points can be made with respect to establishment mentality in the USSR--the government there also seeks to control information, and the press generally complies because it needs to preserve a viable working relationship with officials who control access to needed information.

Wolin and Slusser bluntly noted that "the Kremlin bosses determine which data should be published undoctored, which should be published in twisted form to support the current propaganda line, and which should be kept secret" (22, p. 118). And, significantly, the press complies, as Smith noted when he wrote that stories are stopped and angles changed because of requests by the Communist Party (18, p. 371).

The three levels of Tass provide further evidence of the efficacy of the Soviet press controls. Different levels of need-to-know and status result in eligibility for either blue-green Tass, which is heavily censored and contains little solid information, or either of the two more informative versions, white Tass or the most informative red Tass (18, p. 355).

West Germany, like the US and the USSR, is a country where the government seeks to curtail information and where the press is typically compliant. Kurt Mattick, Bundestag member and former Chairman of the Berlin unit of the Social Democratic party, offers the West German government point of view regarding press information gathering; "The German press is young and lacks a tradition of self-censorship. Too many young reporters think only of the money they can earn through a sensational expose, rather than considering the effects which might be detrimental to the country" (15, p. 197).

Hans Tiede, editor of the Spiegel, confirmed this attitude on the part of government officials towards the press; "If you criticize the government in Germany, you are immediately accused of 'dirtying the nest,' of being a Communist, a Fascist, what have you. The government does not seem to be able to distinguish between criticism and sedition" (15, p. 197).

Conditions are similar in Great Britain, with respect to government desires for secrecy and press compliance. Griffith observed that "It is commonly believed by those who have dealings with the departments of state in the government of the United Kingdom that the government is obsessed with secrecy and by nature and habit withholds information unless forced to disclose it" (5, p. 328). A similar conclusion was articulated by Franck and Weisbrod, who argued that "...discretion in British newspapers...is rooted not just in the Constitution, but also in the politico-social relations between journalists and government. A respect for secrecy is more than enforcement of a law, it has become a habit of mind, both among the potential providers of secrets--the civil servants and ministers--and among journalists themselves" (3, p. 220).

Do journalists in the United Kingdom comply when their official sources request that stories be killed or watered down? There are indications that they do, especially the lobby correspondents, who cover the central government; "The lobby correspondents personify the ambivalence of the journalist profession in encounters with the government...they are highly vulnerable to ministerial pressures and sanctions" (3, p. 221).

Not only are the lobby reporters reluctant to probe into governmental secrets, but all British journalists suffer from over-reliance on a relative handful of official sources; "The basic structural weakness of British journalism in its attempts at disclosure is its dependence on

relatively few sources of information...All correspondents who are concerned with central areas of administration--whether political, foreign, defense, or even environmental--find themselves relying heavily on the few people inside the relevant government department who are authorized, or feel themselves free, to provide information..." (3, p. 220).

In conclusion, it appears that the US, USSR, West Germany and Great Britain, desire to limit information about government activities. Similarly, the press in all four nations appears to be relatively compliant, frequently slanting government requests for secrecy. However, there are important differences, especially with respect to the enforcement of informal controls. In the USSR, informal controls of information are quite literally a matter of life and death; the other three nations appear more humane.

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